Gay activist finds he's at home in 'belly of the beast'

D'ARCY FALLON

COMMENTARY

This is the story of a conservative city, an openly gay man and the unlikely, ironic relationship between the two. When activist Frank Whitworth came here, he never thought he would be changed by this city. He never expected to call it home, never anticipated loving it.

The distance he has come within himself — the emotional territory he's negotiated over five tumultuous years since the passage of the anti-gay-rights ordinance known as Amendment 2 — is the kind of journey that can only take place from the inside out.

I have been trying to write the story of Whitworth's journey for months — no, years, really — and never been able to find a neat angle for it, partly because Whitworth is a complicated, paradoxical character, partly because the struggle to understand a place so different from one's roots is a story many of us share.

The city Frank Whitworth himself once referred to as "the belly of the beast" is now his hometown, the place he says he's happiest. Earlier this week, Whitworth announced he was resigning from Ground Zero, the local gay rights organization he helped found after Colorado voters passed Amendment 2. He plans to broaden his activist efforts. If there is ever a time to write a piece about Whitworth, it is now.

But I'm still struggling to find the right words to describe this fiercely private, droll, soft-spoken Virginian who is so different from his public persona. Many adjectives have been used to describe him: catalyst, hell-raiser, raconteur, peacemaker, award-winning activist, gourmet. The titles are clumsy approximations.

Whitworth's quirky personality has always been more interesting to me than his politics or the many hats he wears. Character is made up a million different conflicting traits, but those nuances don't always find their way into black-and-white

See **FALLON**/LIF5

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Frank Whitworth raises turtle doves — creatures he finds gentle and beautiful.

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LIFESTYLE

Fallon/'I need to belong, to be a part of something'

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A year ago, I sat in Whitworth's closet-sized office at Ground Zero, listening to him talk about how Colorado Springs had changed since Amendment 2. The city was becoming more moderate and finding middle ground again, he said. The pendulum was swinging back. As he spoke, two turtle doves he'd raised flew around the room, lighting now and then on his shoulders. He'd named them Hope and Justice because they were hatched on the same day the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Amendment 2.

Whitworth, 57, said he liked to have them around because they were gentle and beautiful. He liked to hear them coo, liked to watch them perch on his computer. I nodded and wrote down: Raises doves. And I thought: What an odd bird.

He told me about his son, Erik, whom he adopted as a young boy when his mother was dying of cancer. Erik, now 30, works at a Salida restaurant. He's the kind of guy, Frank boasted, who can party with steelworkers or talk opera at The Pepper Tree. When Whitworth first took on the job at Ground Zero, he'd didn't get much of a salary, so Erik supported him for two years.

Once, when Whitworth was visiting him at the

> "The truth is, anger gets you nowhere. We had reason on our side."
>
> **Frank Whitworth**

restaurant in Salida, someone came up to him and said, "Erik tells me you're the head queer." Frank smiled. "Erik was proud of who I am and was bragging about me." The word "queer" no longer had the power to wound; both he and Erik had decided long ago to "de-criminalize" it, he said.

It makes perfect sense that Frank Whitworth would feel at home in a city that has been called "ground zero" in the battle over gay rights. He grew up in Portsmouth, Va., in the bosom of a traditional, church-going family. He learned about prejudice as an adolescent when a black family wanted to attend services at Whitworth's all-white Baptist church. Whitworth's minister consented with this caveat: The black family could sit in the back of the church in a separate section with collapsible doors. But even at that distance, the church elders were upset and fired the minister for letting the family join in the first place.

"I was upset, angry. I didn't understand it. It was the first time I saw prejudice as prejudice, as opposed to a thing everybody was. I didn't know what it was until then."

That sense of justice has propelled him through his life and made him an activist, working for civil rights in the South and, later, for gay rights, he told me.

The arc of his life has brought him to this city twice. He came in the free-wheeling, live-and-let-live '70s and worked as a maitre d' at The Tavern at The Broadmoor. He stayed in Colorado Springs for a decade, only to leave for jobs around the country. When he returned in 1990, Colorado Springs seemed, to him, to be a different kind of place. Money was tight, the economy was bleak, and the spirit of conservatism that has always dominated this town now had a sharper edge to it, buoyed by the presence of such influential organizations as Focus on the Family.

So why would someone like Frank Whitworth want to stay in Colorado Springs, where Amendment 2 passed by a two-thirds majority, compared with 53 percent statewide?

It didn't happen overnight. Before Amendment 2 passed, he was a "couch potato," poised to leave Colorado Springs for a better job. Much to his amazement, the amendment did pass and he found he was so furious that leaving seemed unthinkable. Out of anger, he helped found Ground Zero, and the gay and minority communities began organizing, coalescing and talking to each other.

Time passed, tempers cooled, wounds healed, gays and lesbians came out of the closet and started organizing. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled Amendment 2 was unconstitutional. "There was anger in the beginning, but I moved away from it, as many of us did," he said. "The truth is, anger gets you nowhere. We had reason on our side."

Ironically, thanks to Amendment 2, Ground Zero has attained the kind of legitimacy that would have seemed impossible five years ago. This year, in fact, the group joined the Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce.

As for Whitworth, he found an unlikely anchor in a place that some outsiders have called the "Vatican of Fundamentalism."

"I need to belong, to be a part of something," he explains. "I wanted to contribute to this community, as well as receive from it. This is home now. To me, the difference between 1992 and 1997 is a whole new world."

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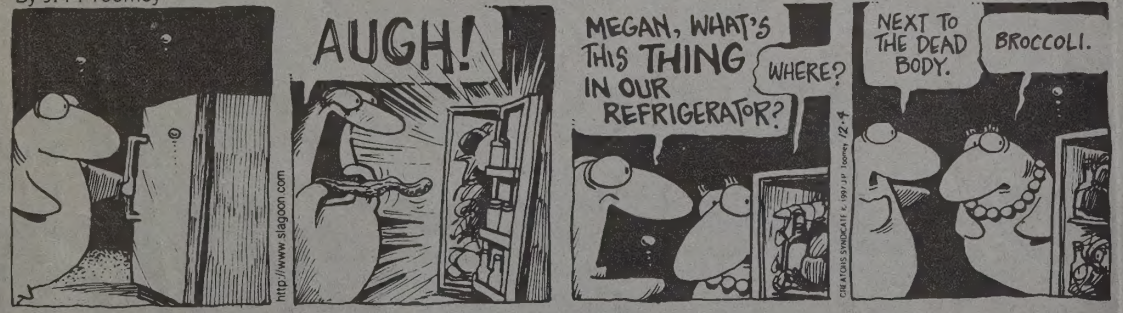

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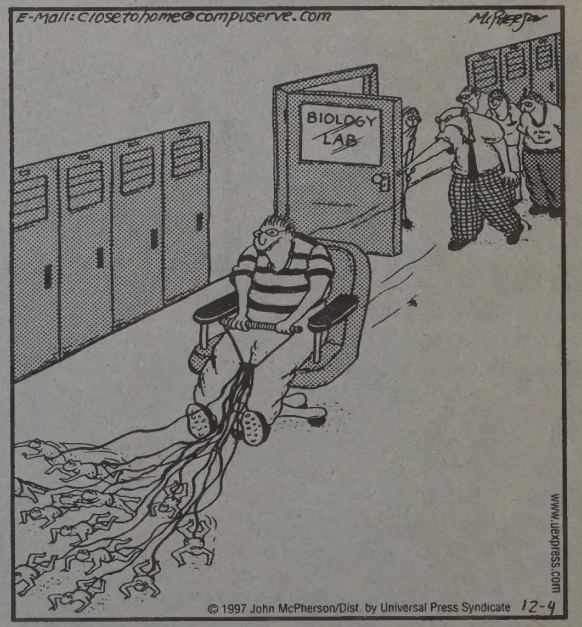

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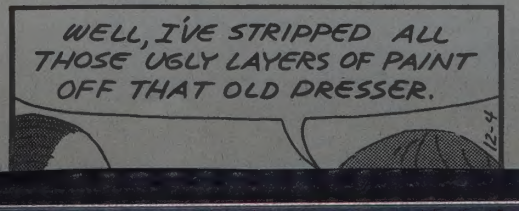

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